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SUBJECT: THE FUTURE OF FRANCE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: France faces several challenges to its traditional leadership role among its former colonies and Africa's other francophone countries. We foresee a gradual decline of French influence in Africa, based on generational change, an increased willingness on the part of Africans to look beyond France to meet their needs, increased engagement by others in Africa (including the U.S.), changes in the nature of Africa's problems, and limitations on France's ability to devote resources and attention to Africa in the face of other priorities.

¶12. (C) Although President Chirac, still France's "Africa desk officer," may attempt to operate on the belief that the old model (French primacy and African deference) remains effective, the French appear increasingly open to cooperation with others, including the U.S. However, while France's difficulties in maintaining influence in Africa may produce opportunities for the U.S., France will likely continue to prefer EU and/or UN involvement to U.S./UK or NATO engagement, as France has demonstrated in seeking only a limited NATO role in Darfur. Nonetheless, it is essential that the U.S. prepare to assume greater responsibility for addressing urgent developments in Africa that France might previously have sought to manage alone or with minimal assistance. We should seek to work with the French and ensure a continued meaningful French contribution in Africa. This is the valedictory message of Charles Neary, who departs Paris after four years as Africa Watcher. END SUMMARY.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FRANCE'S "SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP"

¶13. (C) After a long colonial presence that formally ended barely two generations ago, France remains engaged in francophone Africa, where it attempts to maintain its political, economic, and cultural influence. Most notably, it retains five permanent military bases in Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Gabon, and Senegal. In addition, other units serve at any given time with multinational forces in several African countries (at present, mainly in Cote d'Ivoire). The roughly 11,000 French forces stationed either permanently or on temporary deployment in Africa amount to 63 percent of all French forces located outside metropolitan France. Politically, France organizes bi-annual France/Africa summits, alternating between France and Africa, which are well attended by African leaders. The most recent (Paris 2003) drew 46 heads of state and government; the next takes place in Mali in December 2005.

¶14. (C) Culturally, France leads the "Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie," a grouping that includes francophone Africa and serves to enhance French influence. Francophone African countries participate in this organization more for pragmatic than sentimental reasons or out of self-identification with France. This will be even more the case as true African Francophiles, such as Senegal's Senghor and Cote d'Ivoire's Houphouet-Boigny, pass from the scene. The last "Francophonie" summit occurred in Burkina Faso in November 2004 and was inevitably dominated by the Cote d'Ivoire crisis. "Francophonie" will remain a significant concept in some African countries but its role in Africa is likely to wane, as it has in former French Indochina.

¶15. (C) From the African perspective, certain elements of the French model remain important, with the French educational system, governmental and bureaucratic structures, and ways of doing business, entrenched in many former colonies. Notions of "Francophonie" aside, the French language remains a neutral and unifying force in some African countries, where several local languages may vie for dominance and familiarity with a Western language is deemed essential.

¶16. (C) Africa continues to enjoy a unique status within the GOF policy-making apparatus. The Presidency continues to operate a small "Africa Cell," set apart from the "Diplomatic Cell," that is uniquely responsible for Africa. The influence of the Presidency on African affairs is likely to continue for now, given that Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy, like his predecessor, Michel Barnier, has little experience with Africa. Douste-Blazy, a former

Minister of Health and a physician, may, however, be more attuned than his predecessor to Africa's health care problems, and he visited Chad, Sudan, and Niger in July 2005 not long after taking office.

BUT CHANGE IS COMING

¶17. (C) Although the arrangements described above remain in place and continue to function, it is not clear whether they will allow France to influence francophone Africa as successfully as they did during the early post-colonial period now ending. Other forces -- generational, demographic, and political/cultural -- are making it more difficult for France to maintain the kind of influence in Africa that it was long able to take for granted.

GENERATIONAL CHANGE: LEADERSHIP

¶18. (C) Like his predecessors, President Chirac has cultivated African leaders for decades and regards many of them, such as Gabon's Bongo, Chad's Deby, and Congo's Sassou, as personal friends. These relationships and friendships have been an important element of GOF Africa policy for years. However, Chirac may be the last in a line of French leaders able to maintain such ties. Chirac's 2007 re-election prospects look dim; none of his likely successors (with the possible exception of PM de Villepin, who served in the MFA's Africa Bureau earlier in his career) has had such close, sustained relationships with African leaders.

¶19. (C) Generational and demographic change in Africa is also weakening Africa's ties to France. Gone are the days when many of francophone Africa's first generation of independent leaders were members of the French establishment, as were Senghor (Academie Francaise) and Houphouet-Boigny (former GOF Minister and French parliamentarian).

¶10. (C) Today's francophone African leaders seem less inclined to bow reflexively towards France. This is a result of the general decline of France's international profile and also the increased exposure of Africans to other societies, such as the U.S., in today's global environment. Some of Africa's current leaders, such as Ivoirian President Gbagbo and, to a lesser extent, Senegalese President Wade and Djiboutian President Guelleh, who reached political maturity after independence, are not so compliant as their predecessors. As Africans even further removed from the era of French dominance assume leadership, this trend is likely to accelerate. We would welcome comments from African post on their host countries' views towards France and regarding the other issues discussed in this cable.

AFRICA'S CHALLENGES REQUIRE A BROADER APPROACH

¶11. (C) A growing number of French policy makers recognize that the challenges of sub-Saharan Africa require increased cooperation with partners, particularly Europeans and Americans. Africa's post-colonial problems have grown rapidly and exponentially in a broad number of areas -- environmental degradation, serious population pressures, health care (HIV/AIDS, among other pandemics), unchecked urbanization and its accompanying social ills, illicit drugs and international crime, terrorism, and innumerable cases of ethnic conflict. These are no longer problems that can be addressed by a wink and a nod between a French president and an African counterpart well versed in French ways.

¶12. (C) As Africa's problems have grown, so too have problems in other regions. Chirac's diplomatic advisor Gourdault-Montagne candidly remarked to us recently that Africa remained important to France but more in terms of "rhetoric than reality," with France much more concerned about the Middle East and Maghreb. Some French commentators have remarked that FM Douste-Blazy's well-publicized July 28-30 visit to Chad, Sudan, and Niger was ultimately more form than substance.

ACKNOWLEDGING CHANGE, BRINGING IN OTHER PARTNERS

¶13. (C) France announced in 1999 that it would no longer conduct a "go it alone" policy in Africa. This policy change was partly the result of "cohabitation," with Socialist PM Jospin successfully imposing an Africa policy based on "non-interference." However, the policy was also a tacit acknowledgment that there were limits to the old policies. Former FM Barnier's buzzword for this development was "mutualisation," roughly meaning burdensharing, particularly with EU partners, but also including non-EU partners such as the U.S.

¶14. (C) As a result, France has begun to welcome the engagement of others in African problems that it might once have sought to manage alone. In the first instance, this means turning to European partners. In September 2003, Defense Minister Michele Alliot-Marie hailed the French-led EU force (Operation Artemis) in the DRC as a total success, and claimed that the collective action of Europe in Operation Artemis was part of a significant evolution of European

collective security policy. She subsequently allowed the EU mission to be turned over to the UN.

¶15. (C) This does not mean that "mutualisation" is without its problems, especially when it comes to the UK and/or the U.S. Although many French familiar with Africa would agree that the multilateral global approach suggested by UK PM Blair within the G-8 context is an increasingly appropriate way to address Africa's problems, they resent at some level UK leadership in a region long associated with France. France will also continue to demonstrate a preference for EU or UN rather than NATO involvement, as we were reminded by French blocking efforts, ultimately unsuccessful, concerning NATO and Darfur. In terms of trans-Atlantic theology, Africa may appear to the French as a potential testing ground for the EU's nascent military capabilities (ESDP), and it is possible that in response to future African crises requiring intervention, France could try again to limit NATO's involvement, despite the Darfur precedents.

¶16. (C) France's approach to democracy and good governance in Africa is far removed from the activist agenda announced by President Mitterrand on June 20, 1990, when he conditioned French assistance to Africa on democratic reform. In a nod to expediency in an increasingly unfavorable environment, Chirac is more willing to regard democracy as a luxury for Africa, as evidenced by France's muted responses to efforts by African rulers to change their countries' constitutions to prolong their hold on power. Stability remains the watchword. Thus, African leaders such as Chad's Idriss Deby seem confident that they need not fear French criticism, and indeed FM Doste-Blazy expressed support for Deby during his July visit. As part of this preference for stability, France will continue to issue statements critical of military coups d'état and assassinations, but such statements may be pro forma in those instances where a sense of stability replaces chaos or when unreliable rulers are replaced by successors more willing to work with Paris, as was the case when Francois Bozize took power from Felix-Ange Patasse in the CAR, and which may be the case following Mauritania's recent coup.

BUT CHANGE WILL NOT BE COMPLETE UNTIL CHIRAC IS GONE

¶17. (C) Although trend lines are emerging, this new, more cooperative policy will not fully establish itself until Chirac leaves power. He still embodies the "old school," wedded to the traditional France-Africa model that sees Africa as a zero-sum game in which any advance by the "Anglo-Saxons" in what the French view as France's back yard is a loss for French prestige and influence. Chirac likes to present himself as the champion of the developing world. He also sees his ties with African rulers as a means of obtaining international support for French positions unrelated to Africa, as he did by having the France/Africa summit in 2003 declare opposition to military action in Iraq.

¶18. (C) France cannot expect additional help in Africa and at the same time hope to retain a position of primacy. The French understand the significance of U.S. initiatives with direct or indirect effects in Africa (AGOA, Millennium Challenge Account, Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative, and others) that may contribute to stability in Africa, but at the same they resent the "Anglo-Saxon encroachment" these activities represent. Cultural and geo-political considerations notwithstanding, the French have so far not actively resisted these programs, perhaps in deference to the pressing need to seek broad assistance with Africa's problems, but they may do so if they perceive their own influence eroding beyond an acceptable limit.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

¶19. (C) We should not be quick to conclude (much less rejoice) that increased U.S. influence in Africa at France's expense represents an automatic boon to the U.S. Although we have not always agreed with France's approach to a range of African issues, our basic interests there have remained similar, and the French, with their long experience in Africa, unique ties, and skill at getting things done, have for many years taken on a significant portion of the challenges and costs of helping Africa address its problems. It will thus remain in U.S. interests to engage France as a key regional player even as our influence increases.

WORKING WITH FRANCE

¶20. (C) While there is a growing sense in Paris of the need for cooperation, particularly with London and Washington, on Africa (especially on conflict resolution), Chirac remains the ultimate Africa desk officer and decision-maker, and he will, to the extent he can, try to continue to operate on the old model based on France's historic role in Africa. At a minimum, it is critical to ensure that we consult the French on issues affecting Africa in general, and francophone Africa in particular. Periodic senior-level consultations

alternating between capitals could serve both sides in terms of information exchange, policy coordination, and pursuit of our common interests. We anticipate that Chirac will remain skeptical of forceful U.S. calls for increased progress on democratization (witness France's alacrity in accepting Togo's election results after Eyadema's death). When he passes from the political scene, there should be room to work with the next generation of French decision makers on advancing our democratic agenda and helping Africa overcome its problems.

Hofmann